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### Exploring the quotidian in young children's lives at home

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**EXPLORING THE QUOTIDIAN IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LIVES AT HOME**  
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**ABSTRACT**

The challenges of conducting research in the home, especially with preschool children, mean that the role of the home as a site for research is often overlooked by educationalists. Our repeat visits to 14 families that included a three- or four-year-old child over more than a year as part of our study *Young Children Learning with Toys and Technology at Home* enabled us to develop research relationships that resulted in a one hundred percent retention rate. We summarize the ecocultural framework that informed the design of our study and describe two methods for collecting data (toy tours and mobile phone diaries) that highlight issues relating to the rules of engagement when conducting research that generates insights into children's everyday lives at home.

**HOME AND THE EVERYDAY**

Attention to the apparently inconsequential aspects of daily routines can provide useful data for understanding more about family interactions and activities and, consequently, about children's learning and development. Nevertheless, the home is a neglected site for research compared to educational settings such as schools and preschool, a situation that has arisen as a result of practical and logistical considerations including gaining access, involving children as active research participants and negotiating consents. Perhaps equally intimidating, the kinds of challenges faced when doing fieldwork in the home are unknowable in advance, requiring a high level of flexibility. In this paper we focus on a range of methodological issues that arise from working with preschool children and their families in homes rather than engage with well-rehearsed debates on home as a concept (but see Blunt and Dowling 2006, Massey 1992, Sibley 1995 and others). Our study of 14 families, *Young Children Learning with Toys and Technology at Home* (hereafter *Toys and Technology*), offers a demonstration of the ways in which each family and their associated home-life was unique to them. This was apparent not only in terms of observable differences and the ways that routine practices were organized, but also in how families responded to having researchers in their homes. Each visit required the research team to evaluate anew the methodological and ethical implications of their intended data collection as these could not be one-off decisions taken at the beginning of a project and intended to last for the duration of fieldwork.

It is not unusual for researchers in anthropology, childhood studies and children's geographies to conduct research in homes but *Toys and Technology* had its origins in an educational orientation towards families' roles in supporting children's learning within the home. This interest is not a recent phenomenon: the Hadow Report (Consultative Committee on the Primary School 1931) recognized that children acquire 'almost as much general knowledge in the home as... in the school and... almost as much information about the world and its way during leisure hours... as from the formal lessons in the classroom' and the influential Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 1967) has a section on the importance of parental attitudes and the 'physical amenities' of the home. But this long history of acknowledging the importance of the home and family life in the

education of young children has not translated into a significant body of educational research (with some exceptions, such as Hughes and Pollard 2006 and Melhuish *et al.* 2008).

The intimate nature of the home means there is no equivalent research relationship in other arenas and so, as researchers, we needed to navigate a course between a professional distance and the courtesies required as a response to hospitality, described by us here as 'rules of engagement'. For some, the familiarity of the home and the quotidian nature of activities carried out in that environment seem to promote less research interest than other sites, certainly in terms of preschoolers' learning. 'Quotidian' refers to the ordinary and the everyday, with its derivation in the Latin word for daily, but it also encompasses a sense of the mundane so we use it to draw attention to aspects of everyday life and family practices that might otherwise be ignored.

Young children in the UK spend much of their time at home. There is a dearth of research available on exactly how much time but Tudge *et al.* (2006: 1457) report that three-year-old children in White families in Greensboro, North Carolina spent around 67 per cent of their time in and around the home [1]. The rest of the time was spent in others' homes, in formal childcare or in public spaces. In Scotland, where our research took place, preschool education is provided for children aged between three and five [2], with 96 per cent of four-year-old children in part-time preschool education funded by the government. The part-time nature of provision means that children typically attend for morning or afternoon sessions, leaving much of the day to be spent at home or in an alternative form of childcare, so the figure of 67 per cent seems plausible in the Scottish context, too.

Our interests were in children's experiences in the home, including their interactions with caregivers and other family members, the opportunities for learning provided by those interactions, the material resources that were available to them and how caregivers' values and attitudes influenced these experiences. On the face of it, an exploration of these topics should not be a particularly difficult endeavor but in practice, as indicated above, ethical and logistical issues can dominate. In the light of these challenges, perhaps it is not surprising that researchers seek ways of providing insights into children's lives at home without needing to step over the threshold. There are countless examples of such strategies, although a recent study that aimed to discover how children experience their homes and what factors they consider to be the most important in their home environment illustrates the phenomenon: it was based on interviews with 29 children in four childcare centers (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä 2012: 74). This may well be a resource issue; it is much easier to interview five or six children in each of four centers than it is to make arrangements to visit 29 homes, especially as it can be difficult to find suitable times to visit if both parents are working.

The resource-intensive nature of studying everyday lives means that the number of participating families is likely to be limited. Hancock and Gillen (2007), for instance, describe a study in which seven two-year-old girls were filmed for one day. The resulting six hours or so of film for each child was edited down to 30-minute compilations to act as a prompt for discussions with parents on the theme of what supports a child to thrive. Haight and Miller's (1993) study of pretend play in the home focused on nine children over a three-year period with, on average, one three-hour observation period every twelve months. Lareau's (2003) study of the impact of class and race on the organization of daily life included twelve families in which the children were nine- or ten-years old. *Toys and Technology* (2008-2011) was on a similar scale, focusing on rich descriptions of a small number of families so that we could produce in-depth case studies. In this paper we summarize the ecocultural framework that

informed the design of our study and describe two methods for collecting data that enabled us to consider the quotidian in young children's lives at home. These examples have been chosen to highlight issues around access, consent and researcher-parent-child relationships.

### **TOYS AND TECHNOLOGY**

The aim of *Toys and Technology* was to use household case studies to produce a richly detailed account of young children's encounters with leisure and work technologies at home. In this discussion, 'technology' refers to the devices such as computers and mobile phones and to the products or outputs – such as DVDs, websites, games, and interactive stories - that are viewed, read, played or created on these devices. By the time they started school (at age five in the UK), the children in the study had encountered mobile phones, televisions, games consoles, DVD and MP3 players, as well as desktop, notebook and tablet computers and technological toys, such as play laptops and interactive pets. More information on the sample of families, their levels of technology ownership and parental attitudes to their child's technological play can be found in Plowman *et al.* (2012).

The case studies of these fourteen families were developed over the course of a series of rounds of data collection based on a total of more than 80 visits. The home visits enabled us to produce audits of the children's toys, describe children's play activities, develop accounts of family members' perspectives and attitudes, and create case studies of specific toys and how they were integrated into play activities. The key research questions we set out to answer were: i) which technologies do children encounter at home? ii) how do family practices influence children's encounters with technology? and iii) what are children learning through their interactions with technology?

Given our intention to conduct multiple visits, it was particularly important to develop research relationships. Our repeat visits enabled us to establish some degree of trust and, as a result, all of these families maintained their full involvement in the study throughout the 16-month duration of fieldwork. A one hundred percent retention rate is unusual: when we designed the study we assumed that the intensive nature of the visits would mean a high attrition rate and we had hoped to secure continuous involvement from eight families. The multiple visits combined with diverse methods (each visit had a particular focus, such as observations, child-led home tours, parents' autobiographical accounts of their own childhoods and shared discussions with parents and children about the transition to school) enabled us to elicit children's and parents' perspectives and construct multifaceted pictures of the interactions between family practices, technology and children's everyday lives.

#### **Rules of engagement**

By default, ethical guidelines used by educational researchers tend to assume that research with children will be conducted in schools and other semi-public places. James (2001: 254) makes the point that adult strangers are commonplace in schools but not in the home, making it a challenging site for observational research. In an educational environment, young children suppose that the visiting researcher is a quasi teacher; in a home environment, the identity of the researcher can be a bit more confusing (the two younger members of the research team were referred to by one child as the 'toy girls'). In our case, different combinations of two researchers from a team of five conducted all visits to provide consistency of social interaction and the development of relationships over time. Additional benefits to this approach included being able to conduct research tasks simultaneously so, if necessary, one researcher could engage the child in an activity while the other interviewed a parent. This minimized disruption to the family, provided opportunities for the two researchers to integrate their different perspectives into the jointly authored research notes

completed after each visit, and protected the personal safety of our researchers by ensuring that they did not conduct home visits on their own.

Yee and Andrews (2006: 401) discuss some of the unexpected ethical, emotional and methodological issues that arise when the location for the research encounter is more private and personal than institutional, many of which cannot be covered by a professional code of conduct. Some of the situations they describe chime with our own experiences, although the participation of three- and four-year-old children meant that the ethical dimensions of our study were, perhaps, even more complex. The principle that access should be continually negotiated led to the need to obtain written consent at every visit, although this was seen as excessive by some families and at odds with the norms of hospitality. When filling in consent forms some parents would rapidly tick the boxes to get the ritual completed. On one occasion a mother asked the researcher to tick the boxes for her without having read the form because her level of familiarity with the team was such that she trusted them to behave ethically and she did not see the need for this to be formally recognized. This could be disconcerting: it is inimical to the rules of social engagement to insist on signed agreement prior to getting involved in conversation, but one of the statements on the consent form was designed to indicate that the adult had discussed that day's research activities with their child and elicited agreement. Although we had our own approaches for recognizing the children's assent or otherwise, we felt it was important for the parent to describe the child's involvement using familiar language that could be easily understood. In this respect, as Nilsen and Rogers (2005) point out, the adult is a gatekeeper who can limit access to their child but also, in our experience, can pressurize their child to participate when they are displaying some reluctance.

Gaining access was also influenced by the time of year: families found the period from Hallowe'en (October 31<sup>st</sup>), through bonfire night (November 5<sup>th</sup>) and the advent of Christmas very busy. Not only did the calendar affect the ease with which appointments to visit could be made, the season had an impact on everyday activities in terms of children's dressing up choices, parents' purchasing decisions and the balance between indoor and outdoor play, especially given Scotland's inclement weather in the winter months. The mobile phone diaries for a day in December showed children delivering Christmas cards to neighbors, buying presents and going to a pantomime.

Families had different expectations of the researcher visits. Some assumed the visitors would fit in with established domestic routines, others welcomed the visits as a social occasion or became anxious about ensuring the house was clean and tidy. It was for the researcher to pick up on these cues: they were rarely openly expressed and so the rules of engagement were not always obvious. Seemingly simple transactions, such as being offered a cup of tea, were fraught with dilemmas about how to maintain a professional role while simultaneously adopting the relaxed manner needed for building rapport. While 'rules of engagement' has a military overtone which is inappropriate in this context, the term reflects the unspoken rules that required flexibility of interpretation and limited the actions available for achieving our research objectives.

At times, the researchers' role could become blurred and we were seen as confidants or experts from whom reassurance and guidance could be sought, such as parents asking if it was normal for siblings to fight, or how to deal with a child's language delay. In these situations the rules of engagement were unclear as parents felt comfortable enough to invite a greater level of intimacy but we needed to respond sympathetically without being

drawn into providing advice, scenarios described by both Lareau (2003) and Yee and Andrews (2006).

### **AN ECOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK**

These rules of engagement and the associated areas of privacy, consent and access may seem to constitute low-level logistical concerns but they speak to the broader framing of the study. If, for instance, we had chosen to adopt a telephone survey (as in Rideout's 2011 survey of children's media use at home) or to interview children in their care centers rather than their homes we would have encountered a different set of challenges. The fact that the visits were conducted in the home was theoretically motivated, based on the principle that the child's perceptions could best be understood through knowing more about their experiences and interactions in the place where they spend most time, with the people with whom they are closest. For preschool-aged children, this is usually at home with their family. As Engel (2005: 142) puts it: 'to understand the child's mind, one must contend with the child in a world of everyday real-life objects, events and people. Doing so in part involves thinking about children's everyday lives – the rhythms, idiosyncrasies and textures of their actual experience'.

Within an ecocultural framework (Tudge 2008; Weisner 2002), context and the individual variability of children and their families intersect with everyday activities and interactions. With its emphasis on the influence of typically occurring activities within 'oikos' (the household) on children's development, ecocultural theory informed the methods we used, including the need for situated research that was empirically connected to its location and the quotidian dimensions of family life. As Tudge (2008: 89) states:

[C]ultural-ecological theory forces researchers to pay simultaneous attention to aspects of the individuals who are the focus of the study, aspects of the context (immediate, cultural, and historical), and (most important) to the actions and interactions going on between these individuals and the social partners, objects, and symbols that play important roles in their development.

We did not investigate all the features required by this theoretical orientation in *Toys and Technology* but it helped us to make principled choices about the areas on which to focus: our intention here is to describe the rationale for our approach and what it meant in terms of some of the methods that we used. We do not look at the child in isolation, as is common in studies within developmental psychology, but aimed for a more holistic account that looked at the everyday activities within which development and learning take place. Our emphasis on people, places and things in children's everyday lives enabled us to think not only about the role of family members and toys and the technologies in which we were interested, but also to give more analytical attention to the spaces in which these interactions occurred. These people, places and things are interwoven with the values and practices that permeate family life and everyday activities.

A focus on natural settings and the complexities of everyday life would usually be associated with a traditional ethnographic methodology of extended participant observation. James (2001: 249), for instance, refers to the role of ethnography in developing 'a perspective on childhood which, in acknowledging its culturally constructed character, enables a view of children as social actors who take an active part in shaping the form that their own childhoods take'. However, a traditional ethnography of fourteen households was not feasible within our resources and the demands it would place on families meant that it was not a viable process. The multiple visits and the plethora of approaches to data collection

that we enlisted in the task of exploring the quotidian in young children's lives at home meant that we were immersed in what Nesor (2006: 298) refers to as 'an ongoing project of configuring description and theory into larger patterns' in which the events, interactions, people, places and things that we observed could be seen as 'relationally constituted'.

An ecocultural approach is necessarily going to draw on a constellation of methods for collecting data if we are to gain insights into diverse aspects of family life. Investigating children's competences with technology, for instance, drew on children's self-report as well as observations and parental accounts. Investigating parents' understandings, aspirations and expectations drew on parents' reminiscences of their own uses of technology since childhood as well as interviews. These methods allowed us to gain insights into both the spatial and temporal dimensions of everyday life at home. Assisted by NVivo [3], we created a profile for each household and each child and identified cross-cutting themes such as gender, parenting styles, support for learning and children's developing competences and patterns of use.

## **TWO METHODS FOR EXPLORING THE QUOTIDIAN**

Spending time with families at home is a prerequisite for exploring the minutiae and rhythms of everyday life. In response to some of the difficulties connected to immersive observation in the home we developed the two approaches described here that we used for the purpose of providing a richer understanding of the families' home lives. In both cases the participants had greater autonomy over what and how we collected information than if we had been collecting data directly via field notes. These methods were conceived of as ways of working around some of the problems of the continuous access needed to see, for example, where and with what children enjoyed playing, what their routines involved and with whom they spent time. But even these less traditional approaches were only possible because we had spent time nurturing relationships in the home. In the first, we describe how we enlisted the children to support us in the process of collecting data through 'toy tours' and in the second we describe how parents acted as proxies for our role as researchers by creating mobile phone diaries.

### **Toy tours**

The toy tours were child-led tours of the home in which we jointly surveyed the toys and their locations, creating an audit of what was available (see Stevenson and Adey 2010 for more detail). The tours typically involved the researchers walking around the family home chatting with the focal child and documenting the children's toys by making lists and taking photographs. The toy tours therefore have some features in common with the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2011), although that was designed to give children a voice in evaluating quality and articulating preferences in early childhood care settings. Our focus was on gaining an appreciation of the children's cultural knowledge and toy preferences as well as creating an initial activity for engaging the children in the research process that would be enjoyable and non-threatening. As we walked from room to room and into the outdoor space we noted which toys were available, whether they were accessible or stored away unused, what children played with and where things were located, as well as any comments that parents and children made and notes of spontaneous play episodes. This written record was accompanied by photographs of favorite toys taken by the child, using a digital camera provided by us for the purpose, and more systematic photographs taken by the researchers to give an overall sense of each room visited and to supplement the audit. Some of these were used in subsequent visits as a prompt for conversations with the children.

Arden Bain [4] took a photograph of his favorite toy at that time: his doctor's set. A later conversation prompted by the photograph led us to discover that he had to attend hospital on a regular basis and his mother had bought it for him as a reward for his visits. Another photograph of a stack of DVDs in Arden's bedroom was taken by the researcher on her tour of the house. While apparently mundane, the DVDs were significant because Arden and his brothers were allowed to watch DVDs upstairs, but if they wanted to watch CBeebies (the BBC's children's television channel) they had to go downstairs and have the television turned on by an adult as they were not allowed to touch the electrical socket for safety reasons. Without the access to the children's bedrooms that the toy tours provided we would have missed this information.

The spontaneous interactions and play episodes that occurred during the toy tours added richness to the research encounter that might not have been accessed by more static methods. For example:

Jasmine picked up her toy laptop and began to use the mouse as a telephone. She pushed a button on the laptop to make a noise like a telephone ringing and pretended to have a conversation with her boyfriend. Jasmine's mother laughed and commented that her daughter always did this despite having been told that this is not what the mouse is for.

(Searl family, field notes, round 2)

The informality of the research encounter also provided children with the opportunity to take advantage of the situation by asking for help taking a rabbit out of its cage, requesting arts and crafts materials that were out of reach on a high shelf or, in one case, infringing rules:

Some of Rachel's toys were kept in the garage. She asked us to go into the garage and fetch toys for her but we knew she was expected to seek her parents' permission and that this contravened the rules of the house.

(O'Dare family, field notes, round 2)

These are examples of the three-way parent-child-researcher relationship described by Nilsen and Rogers (2005) and the ways in which children's subjectivity and autonomy can shift within this triangle. By asking children to walk us around their homes, we were able to build rapport and focus on an environment in which they, not us, were the experts but the process also highlighted some of the complexities of the rules of engagement. To reduce the intrusiveness of the method it was made clear to parents and children that they could deny access to any room and parents were given the option, which most declined, of accompanying us while the tour took place. Children often had toys in their parents' bedrooms and wanted to show them to us, potentially putting their parents in a difficult situation as denying access could prove as embarrassing as allowing it. As Tisdall and Punch (2012) point out, 'children and young people are *potentially* competent social actors, but there is still space to consider the limiting contexts where that may not be possible' (original emphasis).

The use of the method not only provided quantitative data about the numbers and types of toys and their locations, it also gave us insight into the ways that children's behaviors at home are regulated by rules that operate in terms of space (which parts of the house and its surroundings were out of bounds) and time (when certain activities, such as watching television or playing on the computer, were proscribed). It is unlikely that an appreciation of



these glimpses into day-to-day life would have been gleaned from more structured interviews as direct questioning of three- and four-year-olds generally provides scant response. Talking while walking around the home provided a more relaxed and fruitful approach than trying to interview children of this age and acknowledged the multi-sensory experience of children's lives at home. As a result of the toy tours we not only understood more about the type and quantity of toys, we also glimpsed the ways in which families order homes, their consumption practices and how both parents and children exercise power and negotiate social relationships.

### **Mobile phone diaries**

By using their own mobile phones we were able to put parents in charge of collecting and selecting data and so circumvent some of the challenges relating to the rules of engagement. This process enabled us to contribute to an ecocultural account of activities within and beyond the home that did not depend upon conducting extended observational research beyond normal working hours and would allow us to know more about what happened when we were not there. As with the toy tours, we developed this method as a pragmatic response to some of the difficulties of exploring the quotidian in children's lives.

We delayed asking parents to get involved in this activity until we had completed several visits. Parents were willing research partners by this stage and eleven out of the 14 families chose to participate. We sent text prompts six times at intervals between 09.00 and 17.00 to avoid intrusion early in the day or in the evenings, all on Saturdays as we wanted to include as many members of the household as possible. Parents were asked to respond to the prompts within a few minutes with a picture message of their child along with text stating i) their location, ii) who they were with, and iii) what they were doing. We completed three rounds of data collection over a period of several months and achieved a 96 per cent response rate with the eleven parent-photographers (see Plowman and Stevenson 2012 for more detail).

As well as providing insights into the spatial dimensions of children's lives, the date- and time-stamped messages created a record of activities that gave us an understanding of their temporal organization, including the mundane or routine aspects of day-to-day life that are easily overlooked by interviews. Combined with other approaches, the method enabled us to illuminate the range of activities, resources, people and places that make up the ecology of the home and are difficult to access by other means. The images and text messages (all text was transcribed verbatim) were collated to form a storyboard that served the dual purpose of creating a stimulus for discussions with parents and children and a representation of events that enabled us to track the temporal and spatial shapes of the days.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Caption: Sample mobile phone storyboards]

Figure 1 provides an example of the data generated by this method once we had formed the storyboard and shows the responses from two of the three rounds, in December 2008 and May 2009. Leo Irwin engaged in a range of activities at home (watching a DVD, playing football in the garden, doing magic tricks and playing with the Wii) and away from home (at the library and at a birthday party). Other examples show children with a similar mix of technological (playing with the computer or PlayStation games console) and non-technological activities (baking or playing with a teddy) and, as all of these images were taken on a Saturday, a selection of activities at and away from home.

The children enjoyed a certain level of autonomy in the toy tours that enabled us to view homes through their eyes. In the case of the mobile phone diaries, it was the parents' perspectives that were privileged, although children occasionally requested that their parents take photographs of specific objects to send us, such as Jasmine Searl asking her mother to send a picture of her completed jigsaw puzzle. Photographs, whether taken on a mobile phone or not, tend to illustrate action and are not well suited to capturing unobservable processes such as thoughts, attitudes, feelings and perceptions. As parents' values and attitudes are central to understanding their views on children's encounters with technology we had to look beyond the mobile phone diaries for this information but they enabled us to describe some facets of the everyday lives of families in a specific time and place and were less onerous and more richly detailed than some other forms of data collection via diaries. Lämsä *et al.* (2012), for instance, used a structured booklet in which parents and day-care personnel reported their observations, although the participants reported it to be a time-consuming experience. By contrast, the parents who participated in the mobile phone diary technique found it straightforward: they always had their phone on them, they could easily delete photographs if they chose, giving them control over the data they provided, and the children were comfortable with their parents' attention.

Without our physical presence in the home, the mobile phone diaries helped to make fuzzy the boundary between our roles as 'insider' and 'outsider' while providing access to mundane features of families' lives. Constructing accounts of the day based on reviewing the storyboards allowed us to ask questions stimulated by what families actually do, rather than what they say they do, thus reducing the performative element of home visits and making it easier to build rapport.

#### **FROM EVERYDAY LIFE TO CHILDREN'S ENCOUNTERS WITH TECHNOLOGY AT HOME**

An ecocultural approach helped us to uncover the ways in which fourteen children in families who had much in common, inasmuch as they lived within a small radius of each other and in a relatively homogeneous Scottish White culture, differed in their experiences of everyday life at home. As the pictures from the mobile phone diaries showed us, everyday life included a wide range of activities both at home (sleeping, helping with domestic chores, playing in the garden, watching television) and away (going shopping or to the cinema, playing football, visiting child-friendly attractions) with friends, relatives, siblings and parents. Even within this fairly homogeneous group it was clear that the rhythm of the day, the geographical locations in which they moved and the range of activities that made up everyday life were diverse.

An ecocultural approach shows how everyday life is made up of these elements along with the interactions between family members and with the world outside the home. Exploring the quotidian in young children's everyday lives therefore requires a range of methods that can be used to build up a picture that enables us to see the differences and similarities across families and the influence they may have – in this case on young children's play and learning with technology at home.

Our starting point was that a child's play and learning cannot be separated from their immediate environment and the conditions and objects that act as triggers and constraints. We analyzed the reciprocal influences between the various factors that permeate family life and showed that the variation in young children's encounters with technology tended to be due to their quotidian experiences rather than the resources that were available to them. Although children were social actors who expressed their own preferences, this was circumscribed to some extent as parents had a significant role in establishing the local

culture of the home. They resourced and supported play and learning, sought to ensure a balanced range of activities, and involved children in the practices that suffused family activities. Children's learning about and with technologies emerged from sharing parents' and siblings' day-to-day activities at home.

We have described some of the reasons why we might want to gain insights into children's everyday lives at home, mainly from an educational perspective, and how we might go about this given the intimate nature of the home as a research setting and the value of carefully maintained research relationships [5]. We have described two innovative approaches that contribute to the methodological diversity required when taking an ecocultural approach but there were many methods of data collection that, cumulatively, enabled us to provide the rich description we sought. As Mallet (2004) points out, 'home' is a multi-dimensional concept that often conflates house and home and can be, *inter alia*, a place, a space, an economic unit or a feeling. Our analysis suggests that culture cannot be separated from the home: while the home is subject to broad political, economic, legal and cultural influences it is also a site within which culture is constructed by the child and their family during their everyday interactions. The home is more than a physical space; it shapes the activities and interactions that take place within the family. Stevenson and Prout (forthcoming) demonstrate this in their description of parental strategies for organizing domestic space, particularly in terms of toy storage. They show how the reassignment of dining rooms or studies as toy rooms has implications for children's play and the oversight of their behavior at home.

Play was highly valued by parents. Toys were central to children's lives and dominated the domestic space: dealing with the quantity, new influxes and storage preoccupied mothers. Arnold *et al.* (2012) and Finlay *et al.* (2012) describe the minority world's current fixations with clutter, much of it generated by children's presence in the home, and how to deal with it. In the study described here, traditional toys outnumbered technological toys by a ratio of about three to one and parents contrasted these plentiful resources with fewer toys but greater freedom to play in the past. Play preferences changed rapidly, reflecting children's development and responsiveness to recent acquisitions or what their parents made available, and these individual inclinations shaped family choices about purchases and activities. Children did not differentiate between technological and 'traditional' activities to the same extent as adults, sometimes integrating their play seamlessly across different products, for instance playing with a technological dog and traditional dolls in a train made from a cardboard box. However, in examining the quotidian in children's lives at home our intention was not so much to describe different forms of play as to focus on the conditions that shape play (Tudge *et al.* 2011).

The mobile phone diaries combined with other sources of data showed us that technology does not dominate or hinder social interaction in the ways suggested by media coverage. Beliefs that children of this age have more technological know-how than grown ups also seemed to be unfounded. Although some parental disquiet about the role of technology was expressed, families made choices concerning preschoolers' play and other activities based on their own values and circumstances and did not consider children's education, socialization or wellbeing to be under threat (Plowman & McPake 2013). Interest in technologies to support children's learning increased as school became imminent but, overall, parents were concerned with outdoor play, encouraging time with family and friends, resourcing play with both traditional and technological toys, and ensuring a balance of activities for their children. The home was a site for resourcing these activities; if we want to find out more about young children's learning, the role of technology and parental

engagement we cannot afford to overlook the home as a research site. Exploring the quotidian in young children's lives at home through an ecocultural approach that requires close attention to methods, actors and space deepens understanding of children's lives by making visible previously under-researched local aspects of experience.

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### **NOTES**

[1] All the children in our families were British White. Children in Black families in Greensboro (United States) spent around 50% of their time in and around the home, with considerably more time in others' homes than was reported for White children. In the other areas covered by the study the results for time spent in and around the home were: Kisumu (Kenya) 79% and Porto Alegre (Brazil) 61%.

[2] Children in Scotland are entitled, from the term following their third birthday, to attend a nursery or preschool setting (public or private sector provider) without charge for the statutory requirement of at least 12.5 hours a week (Children in Scotland 2011).

[3] NVivo is a software package designed to support the analysis of qualitative data such as interviews, field notes and photographs. Its search, query and visualization tools facilitate making connections between different elements of data.

[4] All the names used here are pseudonyms, including those on the storyboards. We refer throughout to 'parents' but this term includes other caregivers in the study, such as a grandmother.

[5] The ways in which we maintained research relationships included taking a small token of our gratitude on each visit (eg flowers, or stickers for the children), laminating the storyboards as a memento of a day in the life of the focus children, and store vouchers to thank families for their participation. We were assiduous about fitting in with family timetables and maintaining contact between visits.

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Figure 1: Example of mobile phone storyboards - Leo Irwin

LEO IRWIN Saturday 6 <sup>th</sup> December 2008					
09.00 (09:45)	11.00 (11:06)	13.00 (13:15)	13.30 (13:45)	15.00 (15:05)	17.00 (17:01)
 <p>With mum watching brother playing football</p>	 <p>Decorating Christmas tree at home with family</p>	 <p>Choosing books at library with mum dad and Cameron</p>	 <p>Watching garfield dvd at home with mum dad and Cameron</p>	 <p>Playing football in garden at home with mum</p>	 <p>Playing draughts with dad at home</p>

Figure 2: Example of mobile phone storyboards - Olly McNally

OLLY McNALLY Saturday 9 <sup>th</sup> May 2009					
09.00 (09:18)	11.00 (11:09)	13.00 (13:06)	13:30 (14:02)	15.00 (15:09)	17.00 (17:05)
 <p>Olly is watching tv with Ben in the livingroom at home. Julie</p>	 <p>Olly is playing the PSP with his daddy in the livingroom at home. Julie</p>	 <p>Olly is making biscuits with Ben and their mummy in the kitchen at home. Julie</p>	 <p>Olly playing with the computer with Ben and their mummy in the hall at home. Julie</p>	 <p>Olly just about to put his shoes and coat on as we're going to Mcdonalds for a wee treat. Julie</p>	 <p>Olly and Ben are playing with their teddy bears and a balloon in the livingroom at home. Julie</p>